

"JIM COOPER'S PET ISSUE - THE FEDERAL BUDGET - BECOMES THE TREND"

Jim Cooper's pet issue - the federal budget - becomes the trend

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By Bill Theobald

For Rep. Jim Cooper, a self-described budget nerd, the past few months must seem like pocket-protector heaven.

That's because Cooper's pet issue throughout his congressional career, the need to deal with budget deficits and the huge national debt they have created, has now become the most important issue in Washington, and across the country.

"It's taken me 20 years to become an overnight success," the Nashville Democrat joked last week as the House was about to vote on a budget for the rest of the year that will cut \$38 billion.

Cooper marked the week by introducing legislation with several GOP House members that would provide taxpayers with a "receipt" each year that shows where their tax dollars are spent.

"You get a receipt with every other major purchase," Cooper said.

For Cooper it would just be another way to educate people about how their tax dollars are spent and to clear up misconceptions about how to fix the deficit.

Cooper said many people think, for example, that eliminating foreign aid would have a major impact. Polls have shown that Americans think that 25 percent of the budget goes to foreign aid, when the figure is about 1 percent.

Some people also don't think Medicare is a government program, he said.

"They haven't really thought about it," Cooper said. And he said discussions about billions and trillions of dollars are hard for people to grasp. He thinks breaking it down to an individual's tax bill would make the choices involved more understandable.

Cooper also announced last week his support for Republican Sen. Bob Corker's legislation that would cap federal spending as a percentage of the country's economic output and gradually reduce that cap over a decade. The Nashville Democrat and Rep. John Duncan, R-Knoxville, introduced a companion bill to Corker's in the House.

Cooper voted last week for the budget for the remainder of this year, but he opposed the budget outline for next year proposed by Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis. Ryan's proposal to turn Medicare into a voucher program goes too far and he excludes defense spending from any cuts and doesn't consider additional tax revenue, Cooper said.

"You can't play favorites," Cooper said of the need to have everything on the table. Cooper offered his own budget plan for next year, which included many of the recommendations made earlier this year by a presidential commission created to address the budget crisis. But he decided to withdraw the proposal before there was a vote because he did not want to upset the ongoing negotiations on a budget deal in the Senate among a group of three Republicans and three Democrats.

Cooper may disagree with Ryan but he describes himself as a "huge Paul Ryan fan" who is troubled by the tone of some of the criticism directed toward him. "He's being unfairly vilified," Cooper said. "It's painful to see." He said Ryan's treatment is an example of why it is hard to make the tough decisions needed to balance the federal budget and reduce the national debt.

Cooper was pleased by President Barack Obama's 2012 budget proposal last week, in which he called for large spending cuts and discussed using the independent panels that are part of the health-care reform legislation to drive down Medicare costs.

"The President supports \$4 trillion in budget cuts? Hallelujah!" Cooper said.